

The Promotion of the Youth Olympic Games: A Greek Perspective

by Lawrence W. Judge, Ball State University; Eleni D. Kantzidou, University of Ioannina, Greece; David Bellar, University of Louisiana Lafayette; Jeffrey Petersen, Baylor University; Erin Gilreath, Ball State University; and Karin Surber CISCO Systems, Indianapolis

Abstract

One of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) objectives is to reignite interest in Olympic sports in the midst of a generation of adolescents who have become increasingly overweight and inactive. In an effort to accomplish this objective, the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) were created, and the inaugural event was held in the summer of 2010. The event has evoked a positive response from loyal advocates and equally negative feedback from committed critics. Public awareness and effective messaging of the YOG will play a critical role in the future success of subsequent Games. The purpose of this research was to collect awareness and opinion data from the sports community in Greece regarding the upcoming YOG. These findings are described and evaluated in comparison to prior research data in order to provide insight related to the launch of this new international sport festival. The timing of the findings and the subsequent analysis are critical to the future success of the YOG as public awareness and effective messaging are key components for drawing sponsorship and investment dollars needed to fund the event.

Key words: Competition, Fair Play, Sportsmanship

The ancient Olympic Games trace their genesis back to 776 BC as a Greek religious festival held every four years in honor of their supreme god, Zeus. The ancient Olympics were held for nearly 1200 years until their demise in 393 AD (Howell & Howell, 1988). The modern Olympic Games were founded by Pierre de Coubertin, a French historian, in 1894, and first held in 1896 in Athens, Greece. Only 14 countries were represented in those first modern Olympics, and fewer than 250 athletes competed in the 42 events (Wallechinsky, 1991). While new sporting events and competitors were added each time the games were held, very few major changes were made to the games before 1924 when the Winter Olympic Games were first held in Chamonix, France (Wallechinsky, 1994). The Olympic Games have continued to evolve over the years as the number of individual and team events, countries represented, and participants continued to grow. In addition, the world-wide exposure of these Games has increased dramatically, due primarily to advances in media coverage and technology. In response to this continued evolution and increasing global interest in the Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee President, Jacques Rogge, presented a proposal for a new form of Olympic competition targeting young athletes age 14 to 18. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) supported the plan and the Youth Olympic Games were approved on 5 July, 2007, during the 119th IOC Session in Guatemala City (IOC

2007a, 2007c). The 2010 Youth Olympic Games (YOG) joined the Summer Olympic Games and the Winter Olympic Games becoming the third sport festival event introduced by the IOC. The inaugural YOG were held in the summer of 2010 in Singapore.

Youth sport has not evolved without challenges and criticisms. This new Olympic event for adolescents has evoked responses from loyal advocates and equally committed critics. Supporters claimed the YOG will provide a multi-cultural experience and education, while fostering the Olympic spirit which helps develop strong character. Critics of the YOG worried that a worldwide spotlight on a youth competition would only fuel more of what is already negative about youth sport. Some of the problems associated with youth sport include early specialization (Watts, 2002), overtraining (Kentta, Hassmen, & Raglin, 2001), lack of qualified coaches (Judge, Petersen, & Lydum, 2009), and doping (Digel, 2008). Introducing a YOG event could exasperate these issues if careful messaging and education was not delivered.

The founding of the YOG by the IOC was clearly intended to connect with the positive elements of the Olympics and youth sports. When proposing this event, Rogge cited increases in childhood obesity and the number of children dropping out of organized sport as rationales, and stated "We owe this to the youth of the world" (Slater, 2009, p. 28). Gilbert Felli, the IOC's Executive Director of the Olympic Games, as cited by Slater, added,

Our vision is to stage a sporting event that has culture and education at its core. By doing this we hope to reach as many children as possible so we can encourage them to play more sport as rationales and play it in the right way (p. 35).

While the YOG had a 26-sport format, similar to the traditional Olympic Games, the number of disciplines were reduced and some formats will be restructured. The goal, according to Ng Ser Miang, the Chairman of Singapore 2010 Organizing Committee and IOC Executive Board Member, was not to create a "small version of the Olympic Games", but rather to place "emphasis on the culture and education elements of the programme" (Slater, p. 38). The Culture and Education Programme aimed "to introduce young athletes, in a fun and festive way, to Olympism and the Olympic values, and to raise awareness of important issues such as the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, the fight against doping and the athletes' roles as sports ambassadors in their communities" (Slater, p. 40). Activities for the nearly 3000 international participants outside their own education events included education sessions, and various cultural and artistic activities. In addition, much of the media coverage was provided by aspiring young journalists and other media personnel with ages ranging from 18 to 25. Artistic, educational, and cultural activities were planned for parents and coaches of the athletes as well, in an attempt to teach Olympic values and help prepare them for the challenges and social issues that their athletes will face. According to Felli, "Whether they go on to become sporting champions or end up mapping out careers in other fields, we want the YOG participants to go back and be ambassadors in their

communities, embodying and promoting the Olympic spirit and values" (Slater, 2009, p. 42).

The IOC's good intentions, regarding the establishment of the YOG, were not met with the requisite effort to draw public attention to the event. As the first YOG approached, the event received very little attention from the mainstream media (Brennan, 2007). While 166 networks worldwide covered the YOG, high levels of coverage on top networks was lacking (Garekar, 2010). In addition, personal and public awareness of the YOG was reported to be extremely low among athletes, coaches, administrators/sport officials, and parents representing six different Summer Olympic sports in the United States (Judge et al., 2009). The strikingly low personal and public awareness of the YOG reported by Judge et al. (2009) raised several questions including whether this lack of awareness was related to geographical or cultural factors.

Public awareness and effective messaging of the YOG will play a critical part in drawing advertising and sponsorship dollars. Corporate sponsors and advertisers, although perceived as altruistic in nature, look to create awareness for their own brands through these types of global sponsorship opportunities. If the prospective audience is not considered large enough to realize an optimal return on investment, then these sponsors may direct their dollars elsewhere. Maximizing public awareness of YOG should be a priority for the IOC not only in order to assure that sponsorship and advertising dollars continue, but also to send the IOC's intended message to the largest number of stakeholders.

Due to the historical attachment and passion for the Olympic movement amongst the Greeks, the purpose of this study was to collect awareness and opinion data from coaches, parents, and administrators from different sports in Greece regarding the then upcoming 2010 YOG. This Greek data was compared to prior research of similar samples of American athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators in an attempt to examine event awareness.

Methods

A brief six-question survey was formulated to assess preliminary awareness and opinion data on the upcoming YOG. This survey was based upon a previously developed instrument (Judge et al., 2009) that was translated into Greek. Preliminary demographical information was assessed in the first section of the survey labeled 'default section.' The demographic factors included: role in sport, age, gender, sport experience, and level of coaching certification. Responses to the first two questions regarding individual familiarity and public awareness of the IOC initiative were achieved through Likert scaling, with a range from totally unaware (1), to very familiar (7). The survey concluded two additional items (yes or no response) that addressed whether the YOG would help teach Olympic values, and whether participants were in favor of the initiative. Responses to open-ended questions regarding the objectives of the YOG, benefits and drawbacks of the YOG, and preparation for the upcoming YOG requested more detailed descriptions from the participants. The survey was distributed through physical educators and coaches via email contacts within the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs approximately 11 months prior to the YOG.

Participants in this study consisted of 147 individuals (31.11yrs. ± 12.75), comprising a gender mix of 38.8% female and 61.2 %

male. The participants had varying roles in sports: 8.2% were youth coaches, 15.0% high school coaches, 4.1% elite coaches, 48.3% parents, 6.8% local administrators, and 17.7% others (affiliated with the sport, but not a coach, parent, or administrator). The research questions were analyzed according to key coaching demographics including age, gender, sports experience, and role in sport. The questionnaire instrument for the current study demonstrated both content and face-validity as rated by a panel of six professionals in the athletic field. The instrument was subsequently tested for construct validity with the three research questions demonstrating high reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha $\geq .75$.

The responses to three open-ended questions were translated from Greek to English and were then analyzed with the qualitative method of content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980; Tritschler, 2000). This content analysis included response review, identification of themes, and classification of responses according to the identified themes, thereby giving voice to the viewpoints expressed regarding the Youth Olympics. This qualitative data adds further depth of discovery regarding key issues surrounding the YOG. The researchers' University Institutional Review Boards approved all of the procedures. In order to better understand the responses to the research questions, Chi-squared analysis was performed initially to determine which demographic variables affected the responses on the questionnaire. Significance was established apriori at an alpha level of .05 for all analyses.

Results

Using the primary research questions, the total sample was analyzed first. Secondly, seven different demographic categories were analyzed separately: youth coach, high school coach, elite coach, parent, local administrator/official, national administrator/official, and other.

When analyzing differences by age using Chi-square analysis, significant differences (Figure 1) for reported individual awareness of YOG were indicated ($\chi^2 = 293.419, p = .002$). A similar analysis based upon gender (Figure 2) resulted in significant differences for reported individual awareness of YOG ($\chi^2 = 15.464, p = .017$), and for feelings that the YOG would broaden participation ($\chi^2 = 5.582, p = .018$). Significant effects were also found for years of experience (Figure 3) and reported individual awareness of the YOG ($\chi^2 = 286.946, p = .001$), as well as being in favor of the YOG initiative ($\chi^2 = 49.015, p = .012$). Significant results were also revealed for the role of the participant in sport (Figure 4) and reported individual awareness of the YOG ($\chi^2 = 145.320, p = .001$), feelings that the YOG would broaden participation ($\chi^2 = 11.621, p = .040$), and feelings about public awareness ($\chi^2 = 103.763, p = .001$).

Responses to survey questions three, four, and five (the objectives of the YOG, the benefits and drawbacks of the YOG, and the preparation needed for the upcoming YOG) elicited more detailed descriptions from the participants due to the open-ended nature of these questions. In question three, participants were asked if the YOG would achieve the desired objectives via an open-ended response item that contained no leaning toward either a positive or negative response. A total of 147 responses were recorded, analyzed, and grouped according to identified themes including four common positive themes, five common negative themes, and

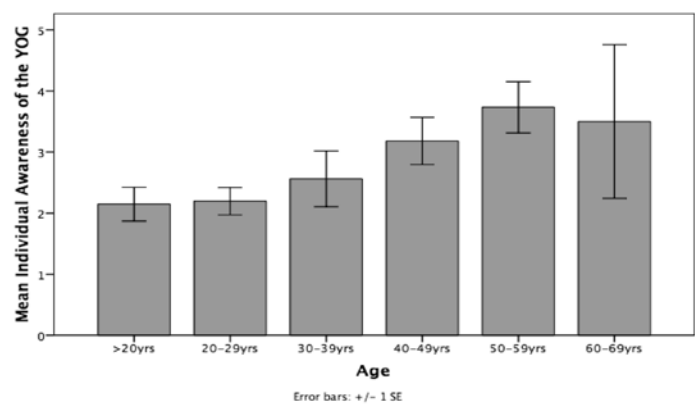


Figure 1: Influence of age on individual awareness of YOG.

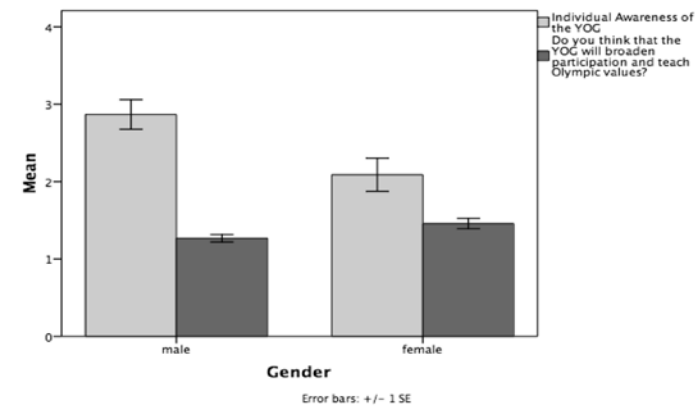


Figure 2: Influence of gender on individual awareness and perceptions of YOG.

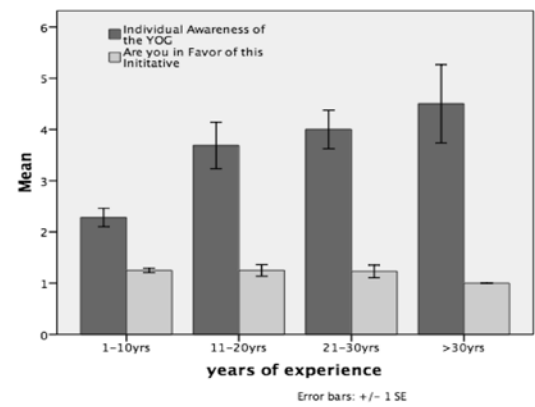


Figure 3: Influence of years of experience on awareness and approval of the YOG initiative.

two common neutral themes. These themes are further identified in Table 1. Of the 68 positive responses, the most common topic reported related to teaching Olympic values. For example, one subject noted that "sport is the best way for friendship and reconciliation", while another added that "only sports can teach values like these." However, these views contrasted with some of the 67 negative responses. The Olympic values and culture were questioned within comments such as "most of the people don't have Olympic culture," or with a concern over the loss of these values due to "too much emphasis on medals and not important lessons."

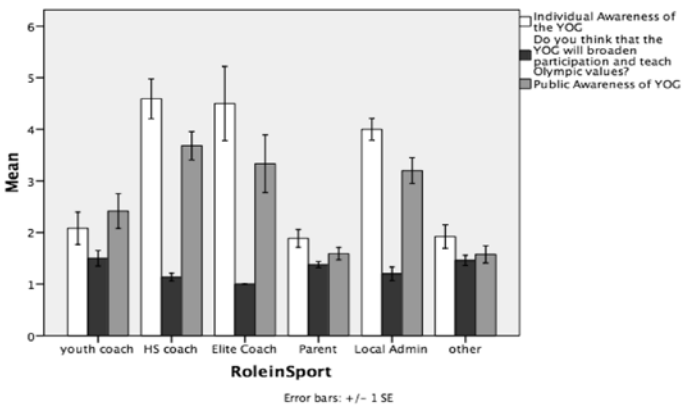


Figure 4: Influence of role in sport on individual awareness and favorable perspective of the YOG initiative.

Table 1. Summary of Common Responses to YOG Objective Attainment		
Common Responses Themes	Number	Percentage
Most Common Positive Responses		
Teaching of Olympic values	31	45.6
Motivate young athletes	19	27.9
Source of national pride	11	16.2
Education through sport	7	10.3
n = 68		
Most Common Negative Responses		
Potential drug use	36	53.7
Too expensive	14	20.9
Too much emphasis on winning	8	11.9
Not prepared	6	9.0
Not enough interest/publicity	3	4.5
n = 67		
Most Common Neutral Responses		
Don't know enough about the event	9	75.0
Unsure a sporting event can teach values	3	21.4
n = 12		

Survey questions four and five asked the respondents about potential benefits and drawbacks of the upcoming YOG. A total of 106 responses regarding potential benefits of the YOG were analyzed, and this qualitative data resulted in the identification of four primary themes: building new facilities and infrastructure, teaching Olympic values, motivating teenage athletes, and creating national pride (see Table 2). The strong connection to 'new facilities and infrastructure' surpassed 'Olympic values' as the most common theme within the responses, as in the case of one subject who commented that the greatest benefit of the YOG was "to build new stadiums, and to organize sport programs for children." Nevertheless, 'Olympic values' were the second most common theme identified in YOG benefits, and it was noted that "initiatives like this are important to teach Olympism to the Greek children."

Table 2. Summary of YOG Potential Benefits

Response Theme	Number	Percentage
Build new stadiums/facilities	36	34.0%
Teach Olympic values	31	29.2%
Motivate teenage athletes	22	20.8%
Create national pride	13	12.3%
Other	4	3.8%
<i>n</i> = 106		

The potential drawbacks of the YOG elicited 107 responses, and the primary themes identified from these responses included concerns about: doping, taking attention away from the Olympic Games, pressures stemming from economics, as well as burnout and parental pressures (see Table 3). Concerns over doping and illegal drug use topped the drawbacks (33.6% of the comments) with one participant imploring, "we have to protect young athletes from doping," and another adding, "the drawback is that young athletes will try to take drugs." Other open-ended responses indicated that the YOG needs to increase marketing and promotion efforts due to lack of awareness. One study participant stated that there was a great need "to inform young athletes of these Games and to motivate them to take part," while another quipped that "no one is interested in this event."

Table 3. Summary of YOG Potential Drawbacks

Response Theme	Number	Percentage
Promote illegal drug use	36	33.6%
Would take away from the Olympics	32	30.2%
Could be too costly in a bad economic time	15	14%
Burnout	8	6.6%
Early specialization	7	6.5%
Time away from family	4	3.7%
Too many commitments	3	2.8%
Impact on academics	2	1.9%
<i>n</i> =107		

Discussion

The first two primary research questions conceptualized the familiarity of the YOG by addressing two separate perceptions: individual and public. The first question asked participants to assess their own level of familiarity with the YOG and the second asked participants to evaluate perceived public awareness of the YOG in Greece. Both of these means for the total sample were very low on the respective 7-point Likert scales with values only slightly above the lowest value of 1 representing 'totally unaware.' The low level of awareness as well as perceived awareness could be partially due to a lack of publicity in Greece given the event had only recently been announced, but significant differences existed among the different demographic groups of participants. Even though the YOG is an adolescent-centered activity, youth sport coaches were significantly less aware of the YOG than non-youth coaches. Individuals who reported higher levels of experience and coached older athletes tended to report higher personal and

perceived public awareness of YOG. As mirrored in the Greek sport culture, these significant differences may reflect the nature of certain roles in sport in Greek society. The perceived lack of YOG awareness on behalf of youth coaches may also be reflective of the emphasis of youth sport coaching on athlete development (training to train), as opposed to an emphasis on winning. The results of the present study are very similar to data reported in a recent study by Judge et al. (2009). This prior research documented personal and public awareness of the YOG as extremely low among athletes, coaches, administrators/sport officials, and parents involved in six Summer Olympic sports in the United States. The low level of awareness and perceived awareness in the present study may possibly be linked to a lack of marketing and promotion, since the event had only recently been announced, and this was similar to a prior study in the United States (Judge et al., 2009).

Significant differences existed among the different demographic groups of coaches. More experienced coaches, who coached older athletes, tended to report higher personal and perceived public awareness of YOG. Experienced elite-level Greek respondents reported the highest level of personal and public awareness of the upcoming YOG, but still did not feel they were adequately prepared as coaches.

Potential Benefits of the Youth Olympic Games

The establishment of the YOG by the IOC is clearly intended to connect with the positive elements of the Olympics and youth sports. With its advertised emphasis on education and sportsmanship rather than the winning and losing aspect of the competition, the YOG clearly promote positive and healthy values for the young athletes and spectators around the world. Participation in the YOG could prove to be a valuable training ground for future Olympic athletes, exposing them to international competition, the Olympic atmosphere, and the increased media attention associated with Olympic competition of this caliber. Olympic competition, in general, draws tremendous world-wide attention, with the 2008 Games in Beijing drawing the biggest global audience in Olympic history (Slater, 2009). This exposure could introduce and promote new activities to its audience, thus inspiring young people to get involved in a new sport. For example, many young people, especially those in the United States, have little to no exposure of sports like archery, curling, or badminton. Seeing these events covered in the media, especially when being played by youth their own age, could spark interest among these young athletes and possibly present an alternative to the computer screen or video game systems. Digel explained that "the Games could stimulate young people to become engaged in the world of sport and offer young people demanding goals to aspire to and strive for" (2008, p. 57). While these Games may never prove to help locate and develop the next world-class archer, they may have positive physical, psychological, and social effects for a few young, aspiring athletes. Even if the world-wide spectators of this event never pick up a racquet, or slip on a pair of ice skates after watching this new Olympic event, any exposure to positive sportsmanship, teamwork, and dedication to excellence should prove to have a positive impact for its viewers. According to Digel, "an international initiative to introduce children and youths to sport and the values of fair competition is basically an idea worth supporting, especially if it is aimed at sustainability" (p. 53). In other words, you don't need to be an Olympic athlete to learn from

and live by Olympic values such as "fair play, respect for others, cooperation, decision-making, teamwork, skill development, and leadership" (Judge et al., 2009, p. 183).

Study participants in support of the YOG cited the promotion of 'Olympic values' as the number one benefit of the YOG. Rogge and the IOC hope that the YOG participants will learn a lifelong love of sport and physical activity coupled with the values of Olympism (IOC, 2007a). For instance, the IOC position on 'fair play' is noted to show the importance of the ethos of the game, and involves conformity with the rules, respect for fellow competitors, showing generosity in play, as well as modesty in victory and graciousness in defeat. These values could offer a critical foundation for developing important life skills in youth. Furthermore, the most commonly held validation for structured youth sport is the educational and character-building benefits of participation (Shields et al., 2007). Through participation in sport, youth athletes can formulate values and explore behaviors assumed to be important for functioning in the larger society (McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). The media continually bombard the public with graphic examples of delinquent or deviant behavior by individuals participating in sport at the highest levels, so an event promoting Olympism is desirable to combat this negative perspective of sport. Olympism is the philosophy developed by the founder of the modern Olympic Movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin (de Coubertin, 2000). According to Parry (1998) the philosophy of Olympism focuses not only on the elite athlete, but on everyone; not only on the competition and winning, but also on the values of participation and cooperation; not just sport as an activity, but also as a formative and developmental influence, contributing to desirable characteristics of individual personality and social life. Coaches can use the YOG as a vehicle to promote Olympism and build positive relationships with athletes. Given the contemporary epidemic of youth inactivity and obesity, the YOG is poised to play a major role in improving adolescents' health. The IOC president identified the rise in worldwide childhood obesity as a potential challenge. "Today we observe a widespread decline in physical activity and an increase in obesity among youth," Rogge said, citing fewer physical activities in schools and the disappearance of open spaces in cities (IOC, 2007a; IOC, 2007c). There is considerable evidence to indicate that youth, while being the most active sector of the population, are infrequently engaged in physical activity of the frequency, intensity, and duration connected with health benefits (Cale & Almond, 1992; Troiano & Flegal, 1998).

Rogge went on further to blame the rise of the computer culture for the increase in obesity. "One can speak of screen addiction," Rogge said, "Multimedia, with its elaborate graphics ... is sometimes more appealing than physical sport" (IOC, 2007a, IOC, 2007c). Rogge identifies an interesting point: Man-made environments and other societal changes contribute to a decrease in physical activity due to a decrease in play areas, parks, and athletic fields. However, even if these issues were resolved, the question persists as to whether sport alone can provide substantial physical activity for enough young people to make a significant impact on childhood obesity (Bergeron, 2007). On the surface, the YOG seem like a great medium for getting the younger generation out from behind their computer screens and onto the playing field, but this may not be enough. It is interesting to note that helping

to solve the worldwide childhood obesity epidemic was not even mentioned in the responses to the open ended questions by the participants in the present study. This is in sharp contrast to a similar study conducted in the United States by Judge et al. (2009) where the top benefit of YOG, noted by the American respondents, was its potential as a vehicle to combat the growing worldwide problem of childhood obesity. Greek coaches may believe the IOC's approach to addressing the declining activity rates and rising obesity rates of the world's youth may be far too simplistic to tackle the complexities of obesity. It is difficult to predict if the YOG will have a sizeable impact on the activity rates or obesity rates of the youth in Greece.

Potential Negative Effects of the Youth Olympic Games

The establishment of the YOG does not come without criticism or public concerns. Indeed, participants from the Greek sports community felt that the YOG contained some major challenges and impending drawbacks, many of which were associated with youth sports. Critics have presented a number of arguments contending that the YOG will, among other things, endanger the physical and mental well-being of the athletes involved as a result of overtraining and increased media exposure. They also commented that increasing athletic specialization at younger and younger ages could have a detrimental effect on other sports, and potentially lead to increases in the use of performance enhancing drugs among adolescent athletes.

There have been few studies published on the effect of overtraining on adolescent athletes (Matos & Winsley, 2007), so it is yet unclear whether responses to intense training in adolescents are similar to those of adults. Overtraining, according to Matos and Winsley, is "fundamentally an imbalance between training fatigue and non-training stressors, and recovery" (p. 361). Among the few studies on the subject, Raglin, Sawamura, Alexiou, Hassmen, and Kentta (2000) looked at the prevalence of overtraining among adolescent swimmers in the United States, Japan, Greece, and Sweden and found that 35% had been overtrained at least once. Additionally, Kentta, Hassmen, and Raglin (2001) found overtraining to be more common for individual sports (48%) than team sports (30%), and significantly more common than less physically demanding sports (18%). In fact, in a study of participants in the Olympic Games in Atlanta, 28% of the respondents indicated that overtraining had a negative impact on their performance (Gould, Greenleaf, Chung, & Guinan, 2002). Besides the physical dangers associated with overtraining, Coakley (1992) discussed a number of additional considerations including the impact on the athletes socio-cultural life, separation from family, competition schedules, and the impact on the athlete's academic progress. Unfortunately, because of the multitude and varying degrees of visible symptoms associated with overtraining, even among adults, a "single practical, valid and reliable physiological marker that can be used to enable a clear and quick diagnosis of athletes who are entering this state" does not exist (Matos & Winsley, p. 362). More research, therefore, is needed "to allow us to recognize the key signs/symptoms of overtraining along with identifying the central determining factors to allow us to help prevent this condition from arising in the first place" (Matos & Winsley, p. 361). Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993) found that the development of athletic talent is a lengthy process, requiring approximately 10 years, or 10,000

hours of quality practice to achieve. Athletes in the 14-18 year-old age group can clearly not achieve this quantity of practice, but overzealous coaches, parents, and even athletes themselves could potentially attempt to make up for a lack of time availability with increased training intensity, additional practice time, and a reduction in recovery time. These practices could well create a recipe for potential overtraining.

An additional factor that is associated with overtraining is the concern about single-sport specialization for young athletes. More and more athletes are limiting their participation in organized athletics to a single sport, often training year round in their chosen sport. According to a report released by the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness, young athletes are under increasing pressure to "train longer, harder, more intelligently, and, in some cases, at an earlier age" (2000, p. 154). The pressure comes from school coaches, who have been given increasing freedom by state athletic associations to coach and train their athletes outside their sport's competitive season. This has led to a greater number of camps, clinics, and leagues available in the off-season for the athletes. This phenomenon can pit coaches against coaches, even within the same school or athletic department (Watts, 2002). Coaches of multi-sport athletes are fighting for precious time with their athletes, often leading coaches to put pressure on these athletes to choose and specialize in one sport. Pressure also comes from parents for a variety of reasons. The increase in off-season requirements for each sport can become a burden on parents, both financially from entry fees, uniforms, private coaching sessions, and travel expenses, as well as the time burden transporting the player to and from practice and competitions (Judge et al. 2009). For example, it is not uncommon for a young baseball player participating on a travel team to play in 60-80 games during a summer (Watts, 2002). Secondly, parents often put the pursuit of professional athletics as goals for their child's athletic career. They are convinced by club, or travel team coaches that their athletes need exposure with college coaches in the United States if they are to be recruited and offered scholarships, or to be drafted by a professional team. The YOG could prove to be one more on the list of reasons to specialize for young athletes. Coaches and parents may try to convince the athlete that focusing on one sport is their only opportunity to become an elite athlete, particularly an Olympic athlete. In fact, every member of the United States 1992 gold medal winning women's volleyball team was a multisport athlete in high school (Watts, 2002), proving that diversity in sport can be just as effective as sport specialization. Participation in multiple sports has a number of advantages. From a skill-acquisition or training perspective, participation in multiple sports can help develop transferable athletic skills from other sports. For example, a volleyball player could gain balance and agility by participating in basketball, or speed from running track (Watts, 2002). From personal experience, when college coaches in the United States contact collegiate coaches to ask about a specific player's potential for fitting into their program, the first two questions that are most often asked are (1) 'How are their grades?' and (2) 'Do they play other sports?' College coaches in the United States typically prefer multi-sport athletes in high school, and appreciate the additional skills they gain from participating in other sports. Another advantage gained by multiple sport athletes is the exposure to multiple coaches who likely use a variety of

motivation and training techniques. This can be very helpful for athletes.

Finally, specializing in one sport often leads to year-round training without the benefit of an off-season for recovery, strength and conditioning training, and a chance to regain mental sharpness. The American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness recommends limiting one sporting activity to a maximum of five days per week with at least one day off from organized physical training. Additionally, two to three months off per year is recommended away from their sport (Brenner, 2007). Athletes who participate in a variety of sports have fewer injuries and play sports longer than those who specialize before puberty (Brenner). Critics are quick to voice their concerns about this aspect of the YOG. If the participants are aged 14-18, when must these athletes begin training for the qualification process? Are we forcing 10 and 11 year-old athletes to choose an athletic path and become one-sport specialists? Will they get the appropriate recovery time in some type of an off-season? Adults training for the Olympic Games have the experience and maturity to understand the importance of time away from their sport, but do 10 to 14 year-old athletes have those abilities? The guidance of coaches and parents thus becomes crucial.

This brings up another concern for the YOG: the coaches. The question of, "who is going to coach these young athletes?" must be raised. Certainly, it is unlikely that current Olympic coaches will give up time with their own athletes to supervise the training schedule of these Youth Olympians. One possible option is that qualified and skilled coaches will come from current college, high school, or club programs. This option could potentially remove quality coaches from positions in which they can positively influence much larger numbers of athletes to focus on the careers of just a few young athletes. The third option is perhaps the most alarming. Will these athletes be coached by under-qualified, inexperienced coaches, perhaps serving more as sports agents trying to establish relationships with potential 'superstars'?

One issue that many of these coaches will need to confront is the issue of possible steroid use by their athletes. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (2006) reported that the use of anabolic steroids is on the decline, among eighth and tenth graders in the United States. Nevertheless, critics of the YOG voice concerns that the added pressure and media exposure placed on this type of international athletic competition has the potential to cause the numbers to rise, despite the emphasis placed on anti-doping education associated with this event (Digel, 2008). Coaches will therefore need to be diligent in their messaging to athletes to advocate fair play.

The present investigation was not without limitations. First, the language barrier made data collection/interpretation more complicated and time consuming. Second, there was limited information in the Greek literature addressing many of the controversial topics related to youth sport in the United States. Third, the Greek sport culture differs from that of the United States, and the lack of information from data-driven research from Greece made comparisons between the two countries difficult to undertake. Though not without limitation, the findings revealed that there was a low level of awareness and perceived public awareness of the YOG, and there were differences among the different demographic groups in Greece.

Future research needs to establish the relationship between the awareness and perceived public awareness of the YOG among different demographic groups in the global sports community. Even though the inaugural YOG of 2010 has been completed, the upcoming Winter YOG of 2012 and subsequent YOG events deserve attention and could benefit from the information contained in this study. Lessons learned and targeted messaging reflecting the results could help alleviate potential problems raised by critics.

Conclusion

The International Olympic Committee organized the inaugural YOG with admirable intentions and goals. Education and culture are intended to be key components of the Youth Olympic Games. Jacques Rogge, IOC President, stated that "the event can offer an excellent platform to create a true community between the youth of the world and the participants by learning and sharing experiences" (IOC, 2007b, p. 7). Topics, such as dangers of drugs in sports, balanced diet, violence by spectators, and the risks associated with an extreme lifestyle, will be addressed at the Games via the culture and education programs during and prior to the Games. The key topics of the education program include "learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together" (IOC, 2007b, p. 76). "Learning to know" includes educational sessions targeting essential themes of sport such as fair play and nutrition. "Learning to do" includes activities for the non-athletes including young sports announcers or team officials. "Learning to be" includes educational forums designed to allow debate of the Olympic movement. "Learning to live" together includes artistic activities/events, celebration of cultures/traditions, and a celebration of the Games (IOC, 2007b, p.76). Only time will tell the true impact of the YOG, but the enjoyment and well-being of our youth must remain the primary consideration.

All this aside, increased awareness and more effective messaging around the YOG are critical for its long term success. Advertisers, who help fund the Games and have a huge financial impact on the events, will only continue to invest if a positive return on investment is determined. If the events are not well attended or public awareness is not improved, funding could diminish over time placing the YOG in jeopardy. Ramping up advertisement investments should be a targeted activity for the IOC. Deliberate planning should be made to assure that the advertising dollars are used in an impactful way to maintain the delicate balance between a successful YOG that sends a positive educational message, yet avoiding the negative consequences of excessive commercialism.

References

- American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness. (2000). Intensive training and sports specialization in young athletes. *Pediatrics*, 106(1), 154-157.
- Bergeron, M. (2007). Improving health through youth sports: Is participation enough? *New Directions for Youth Development*, 115, 27-41.
- Brennan, C. (2007, March 21). Youth Olympics would create more problems than it solves. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Donna+de+Varona>
- Brenner, J.S. (2007). Overuse injuries, overtraining, and burnout in child and adolescent athletes. *Pediatrics*, 119(6), 1242-1245.
- Cale, L., & Almond, L. (1992). Children's physical activity levels: A review of studies conducted on British children. *Physical Education Review*, 15, 111-118.
- Coakley, J. (1992). Burnout among adolescent athletes: A personal failure or social problem? *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 9, 271-285.
- de Coubertin, P. (2000). *Olympism: Selected writings*. Norbert Muller, (Ed.). Lausanne: IOC.
- Digel, H. (2008). The risks of the Youth Olympic Games. *New Studies in Athletics*, 3, 53-58.
- Ericsson, K.A., Krampe, R.T., & Tesch-Romer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review*, 100, 363-406.
- Garekar, B. (2010, August 21). YOG catches international media's eyes: Games carried by 166 broadcasters worldwide, and is a hit on YouTube. *The Straits Times*, p.A6.
- Gould, D., Greenleaf, C., Chung, Y., & Guinan, D. (2002). A survey of U.S. Atlanta and Nagano Olympians: Factors influencing performance. *Research Quarterly for Sport and Exercise*, 73(2), 175-186.
- Gould, D., & Martens, R. (1979). Attitudes of volunteer coaches toward significant youth sport issues. *Research Quarterly*, 50(3), 369-380.
- Howell, M.L., & Howell, R. (1988). Physical activities and sport in early societies. In E.F. Zeigler (Ed.), *History of physical education and sport* (pp. 1-56). Champaign, IL: Stipes.
- IOC. (2007a). IOC session: A "go" for Youth Olympic Games. Retrieved from http://www.olympic.org/uk/news/events/119_session/full_story_uk.asp?id=2227
- IOC. (2007b). Youth Olympic Games Candidature Procedure and Questionnaire. Retrieved from http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_1214.pdf
- IOC.(2007c). Youth Olympic Games. Retrieved from http://video.olympic.org/http/yog_uk.pdf.
- Judge, L.W., Petersen, J., & Lydum, M. (2009). The best kept secret in sports: The 2010 Youth Olympic Games. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44(2), 173-191.
- Kentta, G., Hassmen, P., & Raglin, J. (2001). Training practices and overtraining syndrome in Swedish age-group athletes. *International Journal of Sports Medicine*, 22, 460-465.
- Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Martens, R. (2004). *Successful coaching* (3rd ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Matos, N., & Winsley, R. (2007). Trainability of young athletes and overtraining. *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, 6, 353-367.
- McCallister, S.G., Blinde, E.M., & Weiss, W.M. (2000). Teaching values and implementing philosophies: Dilemmas of the youth sport coach. *Physical Educator*, 57(1), 35-45.
- National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2006). *Anabolic steroid abuse* (Report No. NIH-00-4771). Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health.
- Pary, J. (1998). Physical education as Olympic education. *European Physical Education Review*, 4(2), 153-167.
- Raglin, J., Sawamura, S., Alexiou, S., Hassmen, P., & Kentta, G. (2000). Training practices and staleness in 13-18-year-old swimmers: A cross-cultural study. *Pediatric Exercise Science*, 12, 61-70.
- Shields, D.L., Lavoie, N.L., Bredemeier, B.L., & Power, F.C. (2007). Predictors of poor sportspersonship in youth sports: Personal attitudes and social influences. *Journal of Sport Exercise Psychology*, 6, 747-762.
- Slater, M. (2009, April-May-June). Youthful outlook. *Olympic Review*, 71, 26-49.
- Tritschler, K. (2000). *Barrow and McGee's practical measurement and assessment*. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.
- Troiano, R.P., & Flegal K.M. (1998). Overweight children and adolescents: Description, epidemiology, and demographics. *Pediatrics*, 101(3), 497-504.
- Wallechinsky, D. (1991). *The complete book of the Olympics*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.
- Wallechinsky, D. (1994). *The complete book of the Winter Olympics*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.
- Watts, J. (2002). Perspectives on sport specialization. *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 73. ■